

# "A picture has been said to be something between a thing and a thought" (Paper)

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# **“A PICTURE HAS BEEN SAID TO BE SOMETHING BETWEEN A THING AND A THOUGHT” (SAMUEL PALMER)**

**Simon Bell**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses a written assignment in which art and design students were asked to research and supply an image as a visual conclusion to a short essay. The essay had to be written in a very strict and unyielding format; it had to argue one of two viewpoints on offer prompted by an image which was already supplied and which introduced the task. Thus the essay was in a sequence of supplied introductory image, text to be written, concluding image to be found. The concluding image had to match the shape and size of the introductory image. It also had to match its colour, content and compositional register.

Given the discipline of the students, many were surprisingly unsuccessful in this part of the task, and simply used images which matched the literal content of the introductory image and their essays. Even this literal matching was at times inaccurate and insensitive. The successful attempts used the text – whose shortness meant that essay conventions were severely strained – as an eristic bridge between the two images. This meant that the successful essays exploited the rhetorical potential of format and tenets of iconology, Gombrich’s ‘invisible world of ideas’.

In successful essays, the concluding image also acted as a check on the short text’s coherence, because the importance of its content over exhibitionist techniques was always emphasized yet its shortness often made such techniques essential. This gave some essays an exquisite poise as readings oscillated between the three elements and meanings stayed nimble. The apparent grounding of the arguments in an image was in fact the signal for their flight.

Keywords: register, rhetoric, iconology, alternatives.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The students in question are on Coventry University’s School of Art and Design Foundation course. This is a one-year, pre-undergraduate diagnostic course with various pathways for a diverse body of students who are unsure of their focus. The course caters generally – but not exclusively – for youngish students new to the freedoms of a university environment and to the underlying contradictions and ambiguities of art and design practice.

The short essays which they do with me, and whose conclusions are the subject of this paper, complement my contextual studies lecture programme; both are intended to help sweep away some of the preconceived notions about art and design which might inhibit these students’ practice. More mature students should be able to counter, absorb, manipulate and otherwise manage such notions – but Foundation students might end up seeing them as useful rules and obeying them, and whilst considered or perhaps ironical obeisance should be applauded, thoughtless or perhaps fearful obeisance should not.

Previous formats of these essays have prompted some very insightful and beautiful writing, but the conclusions were generally too implicit. This may be because the students saw discrete conclusions as typical components of traditional essays, and were now perhaps tempted to dismiss them as incongruous and even inessential, given that my essays called for an unaccustomed concentration on form. However, despite such understandable temptation, I value conclusions as ways of emphasising content and argument, of helping students to take “responsibility for [their] own ideas and points of view” [1]. In order to highlight the importance of conclusions, I decided this time (2014-15) to ask the students to supply a picture as a visual conclusion. This was also intended to connect the essays with the students’ practice (thus underscoring the relevance of the arguments) by calling on close reading of images’ formal characteristics, and by foregrounding how matched image registers can summon up alternative meanings and elaborate contexts.

These are key art and design capabilities and explain the title of this paper: the image is less immutable than an object, but real enough to concretise the “invisible world of ideas” [2] – even if only temporarily or selectively. The ideas (or messages) may not be open to or received by all but, in an act of intellectual generosity, we must now concede and acknowledge their existence [3] even if they are remote to us or if our responses to them are unexpected. The question of subject expertise and specialisms (argued by Buckley with specific reference to music imagery [4], but nonetheless applicable in these essays) is also relevant here because it will help to distinguish between levels and intensities of responses to ideas and messages and thus increase the audience and the audience’s response levels.

Matching register need not be as literal as it may seem, especially if register is seen as a rhetorical


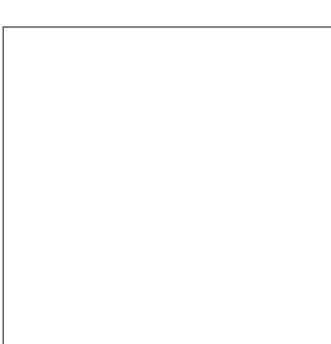
device and some imaginative reading of terms is brought into play. Matching colour, for example, can be as much about creating complementary hues or contrasting shades, which together make a match (which can be debated); content is not just a question of main subject matter but can equally be one of balanced interrelationships, echoing Gombrich's view that an iconic image (one which signifies, therefore) is "built up of non-iconic elements" [5]. Context cannot alter the elements, but it can alter the way the elements and their relativities are read and understood: context in the case of this essay was the existing image, the students' text, and of course the broader institutional context of timing and student/tutor interactions and expectations. Compositional register can thus be a device to connect the reader with content. This can make the process reflexive and tensile, as the successful writer and active reader refer back and forth between the text and the images in order to glean more meaning. Whilst this may seem unnecessarily complex (and even delphic – compositional register can be simply balancing weights and shades), gesture and suggested emphasis belong in art and design's arsenal. Buckley sets out Panofsky's view of iconology as a means of analysing imagery's "deeper symbolic meanings" [6]. This is clearly pertinent in my (albeit brief) analysis of the conclusion imagery here, because the images are mute – they have no specific text (for example, captions) to explain or justify them, yet they have a job of work to do.

Creative practitioners cannot really hope to control audience reaction, but they will surely want their images to live and to connect with their audiences. However, Mitchell does not "necessarily want images to come alive"; instead, he worries that images "take on an alarming or uncanny vitality under the right social conditions, especially when spectators are not emancipated from them, and treat images as if they were alive" [7, emphasis in original]. Mitchell's celebrated work in iconology has clearly alerted him to images' potential to deceive, or at least to say more than might be honest or wise to a willing and gullible audience. Nevertheless, these student essays are a transient experience, electronic and rarely committed to paper, and they have rhetorical poise – this should "emancipate" the vulnerable, albeit temporarily. Such transience and rhetoric should not dilute the essays' meanings, but should stop them becoming locked into disabling stasis.

## 2 METHOD

The essay was an individual assignment and asked students to argue one of two opposing standpoints. These standpoint arguments were set out on the brief and prompted by an image. They related to pertinent and broader art and design themes and issues, and were encapsulated in a particular topic.

There were six essays set, each with topics loosely corresponding to a discipline in the Foundation course: cars (automotive / industrial design), furniture (interior design), logos (graphic design), photographs (photography, illustration), portraits (fine art, illustration) and shoes (fashion); students were free to choose any one of these. The students had to argue their views in a very tight square of exactly 128 words, replacing a given block of text with their text and keeping the given heading in place. They could not change the type size, style or justification; access to the template and the submission were both electronic. Both image squares matched the square block of text and each was on either side of it (see Fig. 1). Students had seminars exploring the arguments, possible content and methods of compression: content was always valued over purposeless experimental writing. They had around a month to complete the essays.

	<p><u>Marilyn Monroe Andy Warhol factory image?</u></p> <p>Scientists have now finally agreed that so-called burying beetles coat their young ones' food with an antibacterial substance which guarantees their survival. These burying beetles lay their eggs on the carcasses of small animals, such as birds and rodents. Research today shows that without the microbial secretions, the young will fail to gain weight and die. The results were presented at the 59th Congress of the Pan-European Society for Evolutionary Biology. Nearly all animals will do the best for their young, but burying beetles, in the genus <i>Nicrophorus</i> (which are to be found in the temperate regions of South America, Europe, Africa and all of Australia) are doting parents. Beetles lay their eggs in the flesh of the animal and wait to welcome their young into this world!</p>	
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**Fig. 1** A detail from one of the briefs, showing the part with which the students had to work. Their concluding image was to fill the blank square to the right of the block of supplied text (which they had to replace with their own text).

## 3 DISCUSSION

Figs 2 – 9 demonstrate a range of responses. These figures show just the parts the students had to work with, and not the full briefs, nor the reference requirements, nor the submission details. For reasons of space and coherence, I have only chosen eight examples and I have not attempted to cover the full range of arguments, nor to analyse results against topics chosen. I have chosen successful and interesting examples;<sup>1</sup> I have divided the eight into four comparative pairs to demonstrate the essays' expressive possibilities and the students' breadth of response. I have generally not commented here on obvious register similarities such as colour, for example, but have instead attempted to prise out more obscure and stimulating points.

The first pair (Figs 2 and 3) asked students to argue either that the new Fiat 500 was simply an unoriginal matter of putting new technology into a scaled-up version of an old shape, or that retro design was harder than it looked, involving interpretation and not easy copying.



Fiat 500s First Cinquecento and nouva version

The Fiat 500 has been alive and dead for a few times. The idea was to provide a economic car to attract motorcyclists. The first Topolino series wasn't successful, but the second Nuova series was a hit. In 2007, the Fiat 500 was revived once more, taking its retro Nuova profile. 'Retro' has been used lately to define something new that has past references. It usually contains some significant pieces from the past that proved memorable. In this case, the Nuova was chosen over the Topolino as it brought cars closer to motorcycles. It also has unique character on its appearance. Incorporating original character in the modern technologies make a certain car a retro. Therefore, a retro car isn't just about cloning the original design, it's about emotions.



**Fig. 2** The text is brisk and impersonal, with a clearly-articulated conclusion – “it’s about emotions”. At first sight the concluding image seems a tad prosaic, not really conveying emotion, and has an awkwardly ill-matched horizon and scale. It need not even have to show the old Fiat – it could have shown a joyous new one. However, it is carefully and intelligently cropped to match, with a correspondingly hard-to-read number plate. It faces back towards the new one, which now seems a little coy under what might be read as the reproachful scrutiny of its discarded predecessor. Emotion now becomes a player; the author did not specify which emotions were in mind – a good use of textual ambiguity which can be clarified by active reading of both text and image. The slight formal mismatches now help to symbolise and underscore the mismatches that can lead to hurt and resentment.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is not intended to cover statistics or grades, but it is interesting – and surprising, given that the students were studying art and design – to note that of the 55 essays submitted, I commended fewer than 50% for their visual conclusions.



Fiat 500s First Cinquecento and nouva version

“An angel was born in Turin!”/ Tiny car, Italian stylin’./ Symbol of a generation./ Youth of the nation./ Old500 legendary./ New500 iconary?// Why old concept? Why old style?/ Is Retro that hard to find?/ Beauty! Style! Technology! Retro! Class! Complexity!// Good old days, Nostalgia./ Safety! Comfort! Pure Italia!// Old style. New interpretation./ Retro air. New generation./ Was a treasure. Now is more./ A legend reinvented all./ Not just copy! Not at all!// Original is ovrall!// From a mmalist design./ To a great great strong align/ An icon brought back to life/ Passion, great care, genius mind!// Tiny details, polished line/ Sun is up, its time to shine!// All screams Italian-chic/ Oh my! What a pretty chick!// New 500 on the street!// Is it real or just a myth? [...]



**Fig. 3** This has a much more jaunty text than that of Fig. 2, and is full of the breathless chic that typifies Fiat. The concluding image matches the compositional register well (in terms of weight and dynamic within the frame), despite facing the other way and having a distractingly vivid number-plate. The old car is shown to be locked into a perhaps familiar and expected visual context – the image also makes readers reflect back on the supplied image and to justify its register via its content. The horizons nearly line up, but that mismatch could be argued to sanction the conclusion’s background. The new car in the supplied image is by contrast clear of background, perhaps ready to claim its own new mythology. This is not misplaced here as Fiat regenerate and (re)perpetuate a world-wide myth, intending that each owner / driver relates to the car differently but lovingly. The concluding image has illuminated important questions, amplifying the text and endorsing its style by grounding its content.

Figs 4 and 5 are examples of the shoes essay, and the two opposing arguments were either that it was lazy just to take men’s shoes and adapt them for women, and, anyway, men’s shoes were just for men; or that in 2014 it was fine to adapt styles and, anyway, in the supplied image the woman was wearing them without socks and with trousers rolled up, whereas men tend to wear them more conventionally.





#### Brogues Traditional men's and new-look girls'

Designers have every → 2 adapt a mans design n make it [ ] not only in shoes but in clothing 2. ysl, spencer hart & stella McCartney agree w/ me. Crucial 4 a women 2 adopt a mans style. B/c hw she displays herself matters more than the [ ] counterpart, karl stefonic. Agreed w/ by jeniffer robin, Johnson & journal of social psychology. B/c a smartly dressed [ ] is excellence & being [ ] is favored. Backed by simone de bouvier. I disagree its a copout Katherine hepburn slacksuit trend & ysl lee → 1966 concept is not new. However i disagree that [ ] should wear [ ] swear. j w Anderson AW13 removes mercy, flattery n comfort. Traditional [ ] swear survives on subtle chnges. I agree tho to [ ] swear inspired by [ ] swear w/ shifts 2 fabric, print notions of virility.

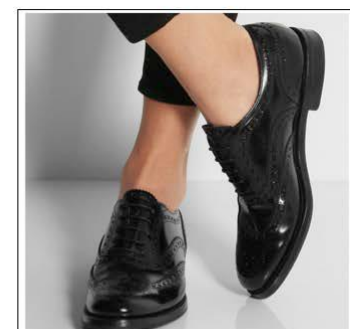


**Fig. 4** There is little literal resonance between the two images at first sight, although there is near-symmetry in the background content's lines and angles. However, the shoes make a similarly weighted formal statement in relation to their respective image frames, and there are gestural resonances between the two images – one can imagine both wearers connecting. Both images show an easy, not unconsidered, yet distinctive way of wearing the shoes. This helps to echo and validate the text style, which uses simply-gendered symbols but is widely referenced and not superficial. The concluding image therefore unifies the whole, graphically (but not cheaply) demonstrating opposites and the value of rereading the text. The text, for all its swagger, is not terribly confident and the concluding image draws this out well now by seeming coy – the three elements are thus balanced and keeping each other afloat until one takes off, helping the reader to make an informed choice.



#### Brogues Traditional men's and new-look girls'

Women have this imperative feeling arriving in a room in heels, angling their physique for the optimum appeal: provocative and alluring. The primitive power of display. But who's to say brogues can't have the same effect. Traditionally, the footwear of men, can also be a woman's power statement as the anti-heel. The lace paneled wingtip shoe and punched toe caps with all its comfort and beauty, is all the motive needed for shoe designers to steal it. Besides, why not take a man's design and use it for our own? Because WE CAN!!! Brogues may be too unnerving for some, especially boys, after seeing a woman stride in a man's shoe, as Bette Milner once said "give a girl the right shoes and she can conquer the world..."



**Figure 5** The text here is blunt and uncompromising. The repeats of capital "B"s in lines 10 and 12, pierced by the capitalised words, reinforce the hardened, forensic unfolding of the argument. The American phrases "[...] WE CAN" and "give a girl [...]" are references to Barack Obama and Marilyn Monroe respectively (the latter attributed erroneously in the essay) and add to its svelte power. The concluding image has strong gestural suggestion, as does the concluding one in Fig. 4, above, but here it gives its supplied image a quite different reading. This concluding image has a brusque, unyielding poise and a straight horizon, both contrasting with (and complementing) what might as a result now be read as timidity and shyness in the supplied image. The conclusion is a clear, grounded statement – it's "a girl" who will make the changes, whatever the shoes: she just has to get on with it and feel right in them, and that's not a bad feminist coda in the context of this essay.

Using Warhol's iconic silkscreen image of Marilyn Monroe as a springboard, the essay questions in Figs 6 and 7 asked students to argue either that Warhol was an opportunist, taking others' work and thoughtlessly and selfishly adapting it for his own ends, or that he provided a pertinent comment on his era, and that the silkscreen process and Warhol's work were both more accomplished than they might at first seem.



#### Marilyn Monroe Andy Warhol factory image?

"Hi nan jst txtin 2 ask wt U think of A.Warhol?"  
 "Hi Chlo nt much, wdnt call him an artist tbb!"  
 "Ddnt think ud B a fan. Do U not appreciate his work 4 iconic value?" "Dnt think his style required much skill or thought." "But his work is very influential, reflecting 1960's culture and you can't say it isn't memorable." "It's memorable because of the lack of intelligence. Anyone could recolor an image. I feel his contemporary style mocks the efforts of artists like myself, who put a lot of time into perfecting a sophisticated portrait painting." "As you know, art is personal and is surely driven by the artist themselves. Warhol's innovative style coincided with a modernist culture and held mass appeal to art movement." "I personally wdnt buy his wrk."



**Fig. 6** Many students used other examples of Warhol's work as their conclusions, and although this

concluding image (on the right) appears very literal and unambitious because it could be the image from which Warhol derived his image, it works well as a conclusion (despite not properly filling its box). Monroe's fatal frailty is discernible in her attention to her own image (perfect make-up, perfect hair); the slightly smaller photograph's precise and mannered softness contrasts with the supplied image's frame-filling brashness. The slight mismatch of internal image horizons (for example, the mouths) are accentuated by the matching top and right-hand margins, and these formal considerations match the essay's use of text speak mixed with correct, well-constructed and considered writing. The italicised emphasis on "personally" in the essay's last line is the key to the argument's oscillation, and the concluding image grounds both arguments in fact – Warhol based his work on truth as he and his audience wanted it: an image of the times, as well as of Monroe.



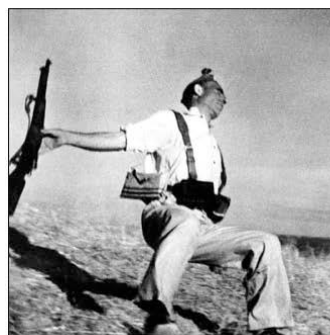
Marilyn Monroe Andy Warhol factory image?

True originality has long since gone extinct. The greatest of discoveries have already been made, leaving us to use them as plat forms while we try push forward our thinking. Warhol was a social critic. His art had violated traditional standards of originality and craft in order to mimic the manu factured and the de tached nature of mass culture. Marilyn's portrait captures the effects of our society's fame obsession. Suggested through visual repetition, celebrities are depersonalized to the point where their humanity is for gotten. The re petition is trans formative, as the mechanical pro duction of the paintings begins to damage them gradually. The same thing can be said of the stars them selves, most of which, not un like Marilyn, end in tragic and un timely deaths.



**Fig. 7** This concluding image, by contrast, shows Warhol's roots and preoccupations as well as reminding us of Monroe's tragedy and sense of destiny. The image leans away as if the woman is leaving, but looks down at us in a flash of prescient sadness. Apart from the eyelids and the lips, there is little else which suggests a literal register with the supplied image. The curls of the concluding image are luxuriant, those of Warhol's image cut back and tight; perhaps this is a nod to the limitations of his process or a metaphor for Monroe's capture and emasculation, making her a symbol of a bigger human picture. In this way, the concluding image condenses and reinforces what is already an unwavering argument in this essay, and its apparent cheapness contrasts with that of Warhol's – the words in between ask us to reconsider whether we really think either image is cheap.

Figs 8 and 9 revolved around Robert Capa's celebrated Spanish Civil War image of the moment of a soldier's death. However, some have since questioned the image's authenticity. The students had to choose either the classic ends versus means argument (if the photo does its job – whatever that is – what does its own truth matter?), or they had to choose the more moralistic argument which was that to be effective the image has at least to be true (and thus, by implication, honest). This essay question generally prompted somewhat more philosophical and open-ended responses than the others.



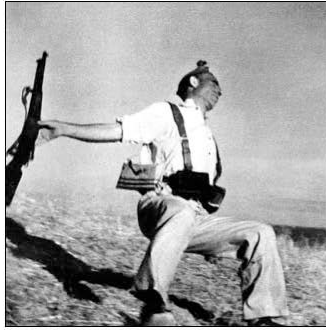
Robert Capa photo: moment of truth or death?

So... let me ask!  
What do you know about Romanticism?  
In its roots it means the dominance of intuition and emotion over the rationalism. Goya!!!  
I find Capa's photo similar to Goya's "3<sup>rd</sup> May 1808".  
Situating in Spain, both images have their focus on a Spanish man with arms held out to the sides that is EXECUTED FROM A GUNFIRE.  
The painting was called unfinished due to the lack of details. But, representing the truth, he putted out his emotions and feelings and this has an impact on us. Even if the "Falling Soldier" was staged, as it delivers a message, it does its job.  
You see a photo of a ghost. "It's not real!" – you'll say. But you still fight with your feelings; with "MAYBE"... This is TRUE?!



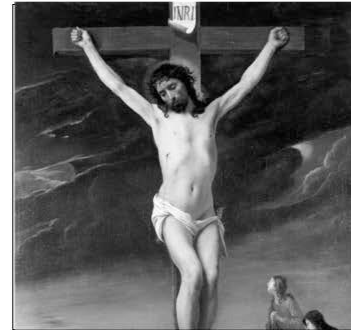
**Fig. 8** The essay is shrill and disjointed, with exaggerated spaces and an unresolved argument. More could have been made of the inner conflict at the expense of the spaces and capitals, which have arguable impact and relevance. One might not unreasonably ask why the Goya was not used, given its stated similarities. But the Goya is a painting and discussed in the essay as a celebrated comparison, and not as a conclusion. This conclusion is softer than the Capa, with less contrast. There are few obvious formal connections between the images; however, both have an outstretched arm, both have a pronounced central vertical, both have insistent compositional lines and both appear to capture a moment. The image actually matches the text well – it too has gaps and spaces, it has emphasised parts, it is indistinct and unresolved, and in this way it is a stimulating counterpart to both the text and to the supplied image.





Robert Capa photo: **moment of truth or death?**

My God is not your God..... In art as in life our eyes both serve and betray us.... Swinburne - the meaningfulness comes from its verifiability..... truthfulness is irrelevant.... For the bible to have bearing on life it needs to be demythologized..... Hick **makes** claims that Jesus did not exist as the second entity of the trinity. The bible's the most bought book by us in history..... Braithwaite's visual stories give us motivation to feel better.... loving... Gospels are not factual documentation. Jesus **does** not give sight to the blind., but truth to the ignorant..... Treat it as Jesus symbolising love....., Capa's soldier symbolising death. Culpritt's ".....we cannot talk univocally about God"..... - art is analogy, words betray us. Capa's soldier is a Gospel, and "truth" does not **matter**.



**Fig. 9** The concluding image above is a superb match for its supplied counterpart. Both images share similar light / dark registers and contrasts, and although the concluding image's background is darker, it slopes at about the same angle as that of the supplied image. The main subject heads in each are the same size and perfectly aligned vertically, and the suggested similarities in the outstretched arms suggests that the soldier shares the same tragic destiny of Christ, who looks down, as if in sorrow for the soldier's death and for all humanities' deeds. The essay covers many points and has no concluding focus emerging from its text, although the main theme is truth and a key phrase is "needs to be demythologized". This the conclusion does, reflexively, in the way its dark and comparatively non-specific background contrasts with the dry scrubland of the soldier's passing; and in its other matching registers it argues that the soldier's death matters because it generates truth through contrast. Thus the conclusion questions its own mythology, a mythology which is potentially damaging in human terms if it quarantines the soldier's death from pain and sorrow by making it a real image.

## 4 CONCLUSION

These essays have evidently produced some unexpected and engaging conclusions, with some profound insights. Several pertinent themes and theoretical questions emerge, for example around texts, epistemology, the unreliability of knowledge, the literal versus the non-literal, social behaviours, representation, convention, myth, technique, tradition, form, context and the verbal setting.

An immediate question is the value of the visual conclusions at all, given the depths to which one needs to go to extract and clarify them, and given that "knowledge is personal within the history of modern epistemology" [8]. This is a definite nod to the well-defined indeterminacy of reader-response theory's "shift [in focus] from 'author to text'" [9]. Taking "text" (non-literally) as the image in this case, one is therefore led to question an image's reliability, and how a "naturalistic painting came to be taken as the picture of its subject" [10] – why do we accept this as truth?

The value of corraling one's audience into some sort of critical mass should not be downplayed, however, if these visual conclusions are to have any validity given their context in texts with such shortness and potential to confuse or disperse meaning. Understanding what made an audience "socially coherent" helps artists and designers to communicate using such "abbreviated signs" [11], creating acceptable conventions as distinct from naturalistic images [12]. Such conventions help to generate myths, which follow "certain characteristic but easily overlooked patterns of thought" [13], and belong to a "vast community of people [and represent] a gradual accretion of their ideas" [14]. The importance of technique should not be downplayed in the face of such forces, however, neither as a recognised and understood capability – a "dramatic step" [15] – nor as a simply recognised (and probably therefore admired) capability. Because of its sheer accomplishment, technique can create – or at least validate – tradition. This is valued by Gombrich "in the continuity of artistic motifs", and perhaps at the expense of the language of form [16]. However, Calabrese claims that "syntax in painting is not only narrative, but also simply formal" [17]. This should be read as complementing Gombrich and not countering him, if form is taken to have local and contextually-dependent signification. For example, Cowart argues that Watteau's "broken lines and chaotic representations" are a negative comment on a specific instance of warfare [18], but whether such shapes are language or not is open to debate. Calabrese's bridge motifs can be formal devices, reconciling disparates [19] as the visual conclusions seek to do. I have argued that this allows for particular, local and temporally-dependent interpretation.

Context has been repeatedly underlined as a prime aspect of the visual conclusions. Acknowledging and understanding it will help limit damage from any "serious distortions" [20]. Context can be the specifics of the essays, and their conclusions and other ancillary factors, as we have seen, but it must also be the images' "social use or function" [21]: the conclusions should not overlook this. The visual conclusions also work in a specifically "verbal setting", and this will inevitably determine their "subsequent interpretation" [22]. However, Mitchell offers a fascinating caveat that "pictures want

equal rights with language, not to be turned into language” [23]. Whilst the first part of Mitchell’s phrase surely means text, the second, therefore, surely hints at the codification of signs and sounds into solidified language patterns which would presumably clip imagery’s wings.

I should note here as well that the analysis of these images is done by me and not explicitly by the students. As a pedagogic exercise, I will make changes which I hope will make any future articulations of themes, theories and connections to practice more visible and subsequently applicable. However, against that I should also point out that the visual conclusions should speak for themselves and should not need the creators’ supervision when being interpreted. Rancière comments most aptly that the image needs emancipation “from visibility (which could of course be seen as a language). The image is “not only a visual form, but always the product of a set of relationships between the visible and the sayable” [24] – this implicitly redistributes responsibility for interpretation, and brings the title of this paper back to the fore.

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